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# For Gates, an issue of inquisitiveness

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WASHINGTON — As the CIA's second-in-command, Robert M. Gates did not know — and did not try to find out — about key aspects of the Iran arms deal and efforts to fund the Nicaraguan contras.

That, at least, is how President Reagan's nominee to head the Central Intelligence Agency portrayed himself to lawmakers considering his nomination at hearings last week.

Nevertheless, Gates said he had sufficient reservations about sending arms to Tehran that he recommended in September, after two more Americans were taken hostage in Lebanon, that the U.S. dealings with Iran be halted because the "whole policy was a bad idea."

The statements by Gates came as the Senate Intelligence Committee concluded two days of sharp questioning of the 43-year-old career intelligence officer in preparation for a vote next month on his confirmation.

The public hearings provided a rare glimpse into the normally secret inner-workings of the CIA, revealing a picture of an intelligence agency that appeared curiously unaggressive in keeping tabs on controversial administration actions regarding Iran and Nicaragua.

"They were raising their curtain of ignorance around the agency," said Sen. William S. Cohen (R., Maine). "There was a conscious effort not to know."

The pattern was highlighted at several points during the two days of hearings. Gates said he:

- Never asked then-national security adviser John M. Poindexter whether funds from the Iran arms sale were being diverted to the Nicaraguan contras, even though a top CIA analyst had raised that possibility with him.

- Was still unsure of the role the CIA played in facilitating a shipment of anti-tank weapons from Israel to Iran a year after the event.

- Never pressed to inform Congress about the Iran arms deal, even though he said he believed key law-

makers should not have been kept in the dark.

- Did not question Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, the fired NSC aide, when North made a reference to Swiss bank accounts and the contras during a lunch in October with Gates and William J. Casey, then the CIA director. Instead, Gates said, he focused on whether the CIA was "clean" in its dealings with the contras.

The lunch with North on Oct. 9 came more than a week after Gates was first tipped to the possible diversion of money to the contras by CIA intelligence analyst Charles Allen. Nonetheless, neither Gates nor Casey — who testified before the Senate panel Nov. 21 — said anything about what they knew before Attorney General Edwin Meese 3d made it public Nov. 25.

- Some Intelligence Committee members grilled Gates at length about gaps in his knowledge and his lack of inquisitiveness about important policy matters. Sen. Bill Bradley (D., N.J.) asserted that Gates "passed the

buck" when alerted to the possibility that funds were being sent to the Nicaraguan rebels.

Sen. Arlen Specter (R., Pa.), characterizing Gates as a "number-two man who plays it safe, doesn't speak up," said Gates bore some responsibility for overseeing the preparation of testimony to the committee by Casey that Specter labeled "skimpy, scanty, uninformative and really misleading."

In his Nov. 21 testimony, Casey briefed the committee about the Iran arms deal but said nothing about a diversion of funds to the contras, the role of North in implementing the arms deal and the U.S. reliance on Iranian arms merchant Manucher Ghorbanifar despite suspicions about him in the CIA.

Yet Gates appeared to emerge from the public grilling with no significant threat to his confirmation. He told reporters after Wednesday's hearing that the "intensive questioning was important in terms of clearing the air."

Intelligence Committee members said they wanted to wait until the

release of the Tower Commission report on Thursday on the Iran-contra affair before passing final judgment on Gates, in case new revelations were disclosed.

The CIA's involvement in the Iran-contra affair also is being examined by the special House and Senate investigative committees, but their inquiries are just getting under way.

One matter expected to be examined in depth is the activities of the former CIA station chief in Costa Rica, who was recalled from his post after being linked to private efforts to aid the contras at a time when that activity was barred by Congress.

Gates, in the two days of hearings, indicated that the station chief was not acting in accordance with CIA regulations and "may have misled us" regarding his activities. Gates told Intelligence Committee members in December that the CIA actively avoided involving itself with fund-raising efforts for the contras for fear of running afoul of congressional bans.